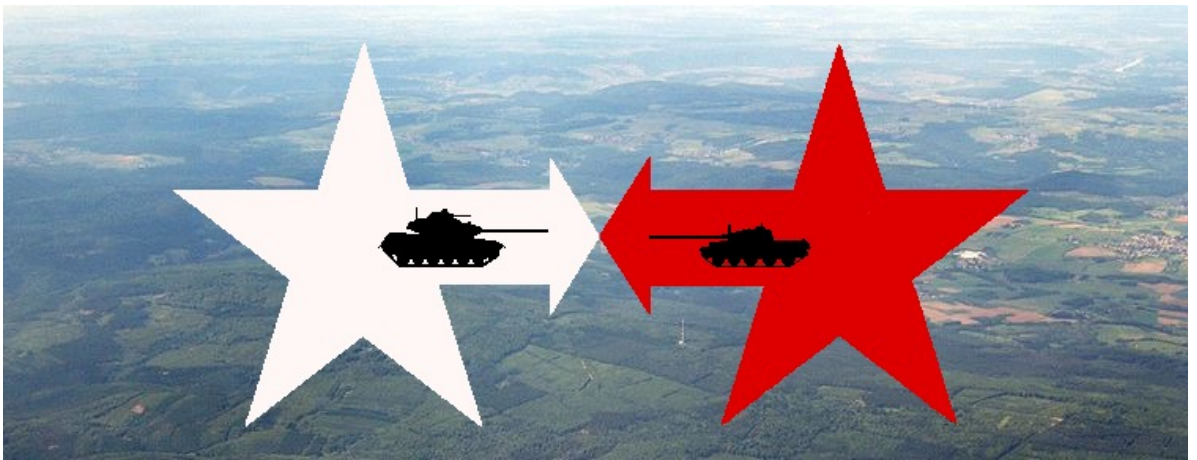


THE FULDA GAP



W. B. Wilson

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Map on back cover obtained from “U.S. Army Border Operations in Germany 1945 – 1983”, a formerly classified document produced by the Military History Office of Headquarters, U.S. Army Europe and Seventh Army. The map has been modified for clarity.

The image of the NKVD insignia was created by user *jgaray* for Wikimedia Commons and distributed under a *CC-BY-SA 3.0* license.

~DEDICATION~

*To the men of the
11th and 14th Armored Cavalry Regiments
who gave their lives while serving
in Cold War Germany*

R. I. P.

Memorial stone to the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment at the former site of Downs Barracks in Fulda. A second stone is dedicated to the 14th Armored Cavalry Regiment.

The 14th ACR served in the Fulda Gap from 1948 until 1972. Following the return of the 11th ACR from the Vietnam War, the 14th ACR was reflagged as the 11th ACR and served in the Fulda Gap from 1972 until 1994.

The signal contribution of these two armored cavalry regiments to U. S. national security during the Cold War is largely unknown to the American public.

(W. B. Wilson)



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Not for ourselves alone are we born
- Cicero

Lariat Advance. This terse and odd phrase, typically delivered via telephone in the early hours of the morning, served over years of the Cold War as an unmistakable notice to U.S. soldiers in Germany that a unit alert had been declared and that henceforth every second counted until such time as the unit's response to alert had been assessed, and hopefully found satisfactory. Soldiers who lived outside the unit's base reported in, vehicles and personal equipment were made ready, and finally, the unit deployed to its designated alert location in the countryside.

For those NATO soldiers whose units were deployed in the vicinity of the Iron Curtain, these alerts were laden with additional tension because the nearby presence of the Soviet forces was palpable. As one responded to the alert and approached the *Kaserne*, thoughts inevitably assessed how "real" the alert might be. For the U.S. Army in Germany in general, and its V (Fifth) Corps in particular, the geographical focus of this concern was known as the *Fulda Gap*.

Although VII Corps in Bavaria had another terrain corridor, the Hof Gap, as its focus, when it came to anticipated operations in Europe, the U.S. Army firmly expected the first battle of the next war to be a major clash of armored forces in the Fulda Gap. "The Gap", like the Demilitarized Zone between the two Koreas, came to represent an assignment of special responsibility for those U.S. soldiers destined for promotion to high rank. The standards for performance of duty in such assignments were uncompromising, and those who met the requirements were considered to have performed well in the closest thing to war during times of peace.



American M60 tanks pass through a German field while on alert. Alerts were a key method of assessing unit readiness and the fitness of commanders.

(U.S. Army)

Unlike the Demilitarized Zone, the defense of the Fulda Gap came to be associated with a particular type of military formation, that of the armored cavalry. As the defense of this terrain feature came to be seen as a key battle of a future war, so soared the standards and performance of the cavalry units assigned to defend it. Although both cavalry regiments assigned to the defense of the Gap over 41 years had seen service in “hot” wars, their Cold War service impacted generations of American soldiers who served in Germany and lent a sense that the shared experience in Fulda had been something much more intense than that typically associated with garrison duty in peacetime.

This document will discuss what the Fulda Gap was, its importance in the context of the Cold War, and the units responsible for its defense. As the U.S. Army confronts various enemies in distant corners of the world, its institutional memory of its Cold War service has perforce faded. In view of this, it is perhaps time for those of us who served during the Cold War to put our memories and impressions of these times to paper – not for any purpose of self-glorification – but rather, to give due honor to those comrades who lost their lives in the supposed peace of the Cold War.

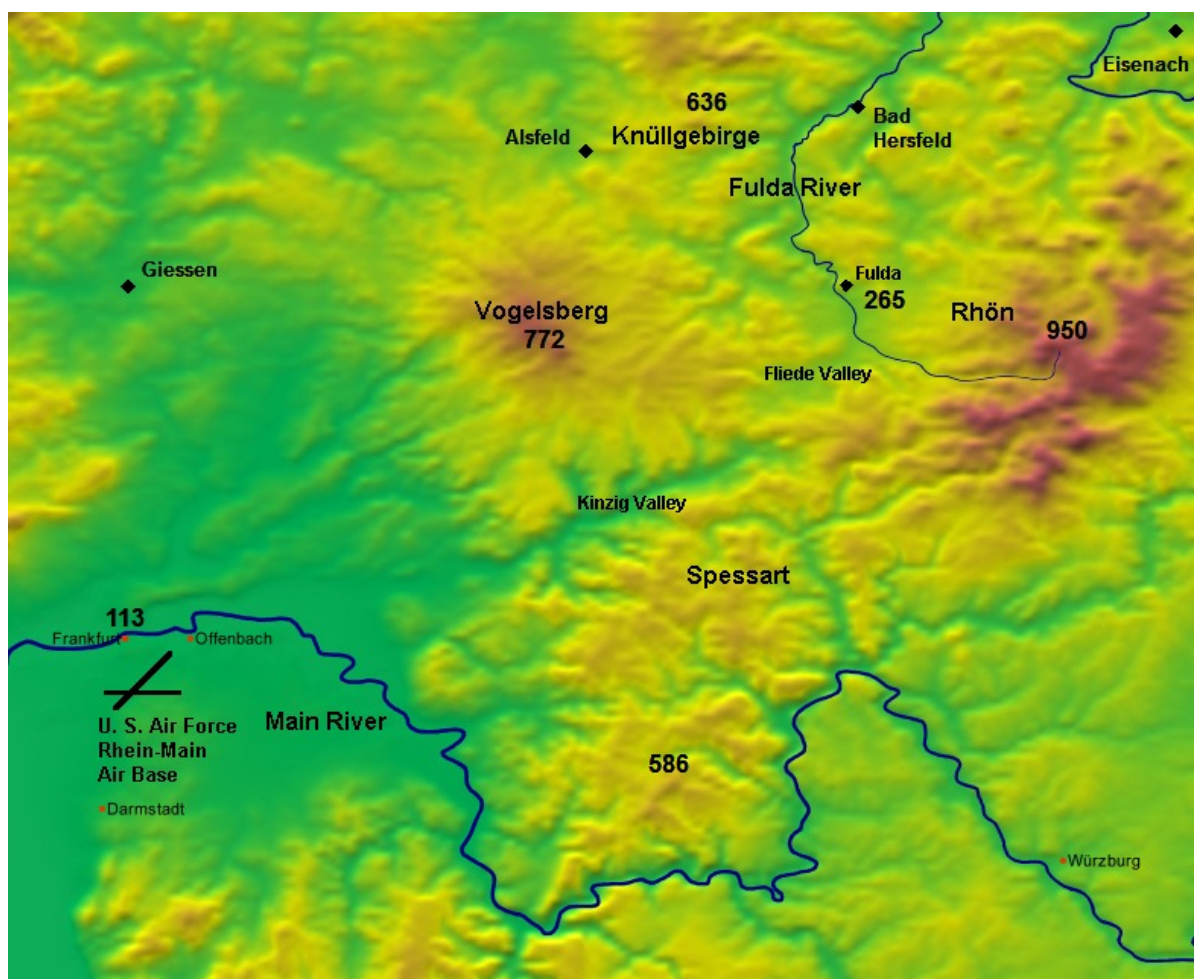
**Troopers of the 14th ACR
patrolling near the inner
German border, circa
1960.**

(U.S. Army)



What, precisely, was meant by the term “Fulda Gap” ? A *gap* in the meaning of terrain is in some instances easily recognizable, such as in the areas of the Belfort or Wissembourg Gaps. The general meaning refers to a corridor of terrain that is lower in elevation than the surrounding topography and more easily passable.

In the case of the Fulda Gap, the definition was a bit more loosely applied, and referred to two east-west terrain corridors leading westward from the general area of Eisenach to Frankfurt am Main. The northern route through the Gap passes south of the Knüllgebirge and then continues around the northern edge of the Vogelsberg Mountains; the narrower southern route passes through the Fliede and Kinzig Valleys, with the Vogelsberg to the northwest and the Rhön and Spessart mountains to the southeast.



Terrain of the Fulda Gap - topography. Figures are altitude in meters. The route north of the Vogelsberg was considered the most likely of the two avenues of advance, and led from Eisenach through Bad Hersfeld and Alsfeld to the area of Giessen.

The terrain corridors of the Fulda Gap are neither particularly flat nor broad. They were, however, suitable for the advance of mechanized forces on a large enough scale to present a significant threat to the U.S. V Corps in the context of the Cold War. The Corps itself was headquartered in Frankfurt, the financial center of West Germany. In the immediate neighborhood of Frankfurt was West Germany's largest airport, as well as Rhein-Main, a large air base of the U.S. Air Force suited to the employment of transport aircraft. Beyond Frankfurt, it is only some twenty kilometers to the Rhine River, the bridging of which was considered to be a primary objective of any Soviet assault into NATO's defenses.

For an attacking force, an unattractive characteristic of the Fulda Gap is the patchy nature of forestation in the area. There are numerous forested areas large enough to conceal defenders and which overlook rolling farmland – the sort of terrain ideal for the conduct of anti-armor ambushes. But the forested areas are not large enough to provide enduring concealment from the air for a large mechanized force on the move. Elevation in the region for the most part varies between 400 and 800 meters, and the forested areas tend to be found in the hill country.



Terrain of the Fulda Gap - forestation

A basic question about the Fulda Gap is when the term as such came into currency. This terrain corridor had been used by military forces prior to the Cold War. Napoleon retreated westward through the gap in late 1813 following the Battle of the Nations. A little over 130 years later, the U.S. XII Corps of General Patton's Third Army pushed eastward through the gap in April 1945. The Germans have their own term for the gap, *Fulda-Lücke*, but this term may have been derived from U.S. usage during the Cold War.

U.S. use of the term seems to have emerged sometime between the close of the Second World War in Europe and 1946. While the U.S. Third Army's official report of operations describes the army's advance through the Fulda area in 1945, the term "Fulda Gap" does not appear in this work. Likewise, *Lucky Forward*, a book about the Third Army written by a member of Patton's wartime staff, does not use the term in the context of operations around Fulda.

The immediate postwar era was a logical time for the term to be devised, for the occupation zones in Germany came into being in mid-1945. The presence of powerful Soviet formations in Thuringia, coupled with the emergence of the Cold War, would have prompted U.S. Army planners to consider how those Soviet formations might be employed in wartime, and thus the terrain corridors of Fulda were identified as likely avenues of advance of any Soviet attack. Lending weight to this notion, the final volume of the Seventh Army's wartime official history, published in May 1946, includes a map titled "Terrain Study of southern Germany" – and on this map, the Fulda Gap is identified as such.



Underlying Western fears of a surprise Soviet armored assault were the events of 1940, in which German armored columns shattered the existing political order and military balance in the space of six weeks. The Fulda Gap occupied planners of both sides as it offered an avenue of advance through West Germany to the Rhine River.

(Department of Defense)

Certainly, the relative importance of the Fulda Gap as a potential Cold War battlefield has to be measured in comparison to other likely Soviet avenues of advance into West Germany. The north German plain, for example, was considered prime terrain for any Soviet thrust against the key German port of Bremerhaven and the NATO lines of communication thereupon dependent. While a Soviet general offensive would have certainly attempted to disrupt NATO's supply lines extending from the northern ports, another significant objective would have been the defeat of U.S. conventional forces in Europe. As the United States was the key member of NATO, an unambiguous defeat of U.S. forces in Germany would have delivered a weighty psychological blow to the other members of the alliance.

Of the U.S. Army's forces in Germany, V Corps had been tasked with the defense of the shortest path (some 100 kilometers) from East Germany to the Rhine River. An advance by the Soviets to the Rhine River via the Fulda Gap would have essentially split the American forces in Germany into two parts.

Both sides in the Cold War were well aware of the military importance of the Fulda Gap – and a defeat of U.S. forces defending there would have meant defeat for U.S. forces in Germany overall. Being responsible for the defense of the Fulda Gap meant V Corps had been assigned a mission of critical importance – in times of both peace and war. With an understanding of how very important as military terrain the Fulda Gap was, it is time to consider the forces tasked with its defense.

Alternately rolling or hilly, open or constrained by forests or towns – the terrain in the Fulda Gap varied significantly and often. This view is looking east from a point a couple of kilometers west of Fulda.

(W. B. Wilson)



Theirs but to do and die
- Tennyson, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*

Some familiarity with the U.S. and Soviet forces of the latter part of the Cold War has come about as a result of written works and commercially produced wargames. Less well known are the forces of both sides during the early part of the Cold War, even to military enthusiasts.

The military situation in Europe did not immediately transform from a worldwide struggle against Nazism to an ideological confrontation between communism and capitalism. The collapse of the Third Reich left millions of “displaced persons” within the borders of the former Reich, and the utter disappearance of an organized economy set these people, as well as the Germans themselves, into motion with the single-minded goal of surviving from one day to the next. Unsurprisingly, the situation produced much disorder, including criminality of many types. As disorder was precisely what the occupying powers of Germany did not desire, the priorities of both the western Allies and the Soviet Union in the immediate postwar period were more focused on the imposition of social and economic order than on the enduring ideological struggle that later came to be a hallmark of the Cold War.

Nevertheless, as there were four occupation zones in Germany, all four occupation powers (the U.S.A., the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France) exerted significant effort to prevent smuggling of goods and unauthorized crossings by people from one zone to another. Due to the nature of the Stalinist state, the Soviets were overwhelmingly the power most concerned with assertion of control over economic and political matters in their zone of occupation, but the three western Allied powers were also intent on suppressing any lingering influence of the Nazi state in their zones of occupation, and this inevitably led to the significant involvement of these powers in the reform of West German political and economic organization and processes.



Occupation: The first formal postwar U.S. Army force to enforce law and order in the U.S. Zone as well as control and patrol the borders between occupation zones was the U.S. Constabulary. The Constabulary was organized and equipped as light mechanized cavalry. Shown here are M8 armored cars in Constabulary markings.

(U.S. Army)

Although the initial U.S. occupation forces included three infantry divisions, their occupation role was more oriented to police and security operations than to readiness for tactical and operational warfare. By mid-1947, U.S. forces in West Germany had shrunk to a single division (1st Infantry Division) and a small host of mobile security regiments known as the U.S. Constabulary. On the other hand, the Soviet Army remained a force focused on warfare as the Soviets had marched into East Germany with entire divisions and regiments of the NKVD, the communist state secret police, and thus the Soviets had a separate force with which to impose their ham-fisted vision of order.

Insignia of the NKVD - the state secret police of the Soviet Union in 1945 and forerunner of the KGB. The NKVD fielded entire divisions of troops dedicated to the internal security of the Soviet regime.



Those familiar with military organization at the close of the Second World War will know how the respective forces were organized in mid-1945. But organizational developments that had begun during the war matured and quickly transformed to greater or lesser degree the forces of both the United States and the Soviet Union.

On the part of the Soviets, they had been overawed by the sheer tactical and operational effectiveness of the *Wehrmacht*. In the four years following the end of the war in Europe, they rapidly reorganized their tank and mechanized “corps” (actually division-sized units by Western standards) into tank and mechanized divisions the organization of which owed much to that adopted by the Germans in late 1943. Similarly, the Soviets jettisoned the use of understrength rifle divisions (and their subordination to “rifle corps”), forming fewer but stronger rifle divisions that much more closely matched their authorized strength. The wartime penchant for independent tank brigades disappeared as tank and self-propelled gun regiments became organic to rifle divisions in the ensuing reorganization. The degree of motorization increased overall and the use of horses for transport fell out of use with the exception of a handful of cavalry divisions employed in the wilds of central Asia.

In the initial decades of the Cold War, the U.S. maintained a significant difference in the organization and combat power (expressed as weight of fire) of infantry and armored divisions. Before the U.S. formed mechanized infantry divisions in the 1960's, the older style of "leg" formations held sway although they were reinforced with a tank battalion organic to the division and additional tank companies organic to each infantry regiment. U.S. armored divisions retained an organization similar to that of the Second World War but with more modern tanks. In the immediate postwar years, though, U.S. armored divisions were not part of the force structure in occupied Germany.

Both sides increased the quantity and quality of antitank and anti-aircraft weapons in their divisions, although guided missiles had not yet appeared in the national inventories. In particular, shaped-charged antitank weapons in the form of rocket launchers and recoilless rifles proliferated and replaced the unwieldy wartime antitank guns. The Soviets rapidly fielded the RPG-2, a development of the German *Panzerfaust*. The U.S. continued to field the 60-mm Bazooka until it proved unable to cope with Soviet tanks employed in 1950 by the North Korean People's Army. This embarrassment prompted the swift deployment of an 89-mm version of the Bazooka that was capable of defeating the armor of the T-34 tank. With recoilless rifles, the Soviets deployed several types, but none that compared to the classic U.S. "106-mm" (actually 105-mm) M40 rifle, an antitank weapon of both impressive reliability and accuracy as well as possessing an armor penetration capability that rated highly during the 1950's – 60's.



The M40 "106" has been in service for decades with many different armies. This M40A1 is in Estonian service.

(Estonian Defense Forces)

One armaments trend had already been established and would remain for the entire Cold War. The Soviet tanks, though less sophisticated than U.S. designs, mounted heavier cannon and had lower profiles – no mean advantage in armored warfare. The U.S. also lagged in the development of infantry weapons. The Soviets developed their sturdy Kalashnikov assault rifle in the late 1940's while the U.S. kept semi-automatic rifles in service into the 1960's.

Already by 1947, the two Soviet field armies facing the Fulda Gap were stationed in the areas they would occupy for the remainder of the Cold War – the 8th Guards Army in the area of Weimar and the 1st Guards Tank Army around Dresden. At this time, the U.S. had a single infantry division in Germany, and border control in the Fulda Gap was shared between the 1st and 3rd Constabulary Regiments. By late 1947, the border region east of Fulda had been made the responsibility of the 14th Constabulary Regiment.

With the imposition of the Berlin Blockade by the Soviets in June 1948, the decision was made to transform the forces on the border into tactical units, and in late 1948, the 14th Constabulary Regiment was inactivated, reorganized, and renamed the 14th Armored Cavalry Regiment. Overall U.S. strength in Germany remained low until the outbreak of the Korean War prompted significant increases in force structure. Seventh Army was activated in Stuttgart on December 1, 1950.

In mid-1951, the 4th Infantry and 2nd Armored Divisions arrived in Frankfurt and Bad Kreuznach and were subordinated to V Corps, which was activated in Frankfurt in August 1951. In the same year, the 14th Armored Cavalry moved to garrisons in Bad Hersfeld, Fulda, and Bad Kissingen. While the units subordinated to V Corps would change over the years, the pattern of American defense of the Fulda Gap had been established – a forward deployed armored cavalry regiment screening the inner German border, and two divisions deployed in depth along the axis Fulda – Frankfurt – Bad Kreuznach. With this posture, V Corps would stand in hair-trigger readiness to defend the Fulda Gap for the next 38 years.

V Corps deployment in 1952. The location of the 2nd Armored Division meant the division would have had to cross the Rhine River in order to reinforce the 14th ACR.



During the mid-1950's the U.S. Army conducted full-unit rotations between Germany and the United States. In 1956 – 57, both divisions of V Corps returned to the USA. During this change of guard, V Corps switched the position of its divisions with the 3rd Armored Division establishing its headquarters in Frankfurt and the 8th Infantry Division doing the same at Bad Kreuznach. This change deployed the corps' most powerful division on the same side of the Rhine as Frankfurt and closer to the Fulda Gap where it was expected to meet the armored juggernaut of any Soviet invasion.



1951: Troops of the 4th Infantry Division ship out of New York City, destined for service with V Corps in the Frankfurt area.

(U.S. Army)

The Soviets continued their force restructuring during the 1950's. Regular rifle divisions were gradually dropped and the mechanized divisions became motor-rifle divisions. By 1957, the following forces were deployed in southern East Germany and believed to be likely opponents of V Corps in the event of war:

8th Guards Army (Weimar)	1st Guards Tank Army (Dresden)	Military Region III*
27 th Guards Tank Division	11 th Guards Tank Division	7 th Tank Division
21 st Guards Motor-Rifle Division	13 th Tank Division	4 th Motor-Rifle Division
39 th Guards Motor-Rifle Division	20 th Guards Motor-Rifle Division	11 th Motor-Rifle Division
57 th Guards Motor-Rifle Division		

* East German forces. The 4th Motor-Rifle Division was at Erfurt and Dresden was the garrison of the 7th Tank Division. 11th Motor-Rifle division was based in Halle.

Clearly, had war broken out, V Corps would have faced stiff odds: the Warsaw Pact forces arrayed against them fielded more divisions than V Corps had maneuver brigades and regiments.

This conventional forces order of battle changed little for the rest of the Cold War.

By 1965, Soviet reassignment of divisional identification numbers had stabilized:

8th Guards Army (Weimar)

79th Guards Tank Division
27th Guards Motor-Rifle Division
39th Guards Motor-Rifle Division
57th Guards Motor-Rifle Division

1st Guards Tank Army (Dresden)

9th Tank Division
11th Guards Tank Division
20th Guards Motor-Rifle Division

U.S. forces, particularly the infantry, underwent significant reorganization during the 1950's. The so-called "Pentomic" divisions removed regiments as an echelon of the field army and organized divisions with five "battle groups" in a failed attempt to adapt the Army to the age of atomic weapons. The 1960's saw ROAD, a reorganization of infantry and armored divisions on a common base. ROAD also introduced the mechanized division. By 1961, organizational changes as well as increased manning in USAREUR allowed the full mechanization of the infantry divisions, and the infantry now rode in armored personnel carriers. Mechanization significantly increased their allotment of tanks and made the mechanized divisions similar in firepower to armored divisions.

M114 reconnaissance carriers on a road approaching the inner German border, ca. 1965.

(U.S. Army)



The withdrawal of the Army from Vietnam led to the 1972 inactivation of the 14th Armored Cavalry. In practice, the unit was reflagged as the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and the border surveillance and covering force mission continued as it had since 1951.

By the 1970's, tactics had been impacted by several technical innovations. Helicopter gunships mounting automatic cannon, high-explosive rockets, and antitank guided missiles were entering service as a form of aerial artillery organic to ground combat formations.



Metal on target! An AH-1 Cobra engages an enemy position with 2.75-inch rockets in Vietnam. In central Europe, both U.S. and Soviet forces deployed large numbers of helicopters.

(U.S. Army)

Guided missiles were also present in the ground forces of both sides. These weapons combined a formidable shaped charge warhead with reasonable accuracy at ranges bettering those of tank cannon. As far as the tank cannon went, armor-piercing projectiles had improved dramatically as had the vehicle optics and fire control systems. Ironically, the potential of these system improvements to enable truly long range engagements was hard to maximize in the topography of central Germany where the typical engagement ranges were between 500 meters and one kilometer.

During the same period, the Soviets had begun fielding a true infantry fighting vehicle (IFV), the BMP-1. The U.S. had nothing comparable and continued using armored personnel carriers as “battle taxis” into the 1980’s. Coming out of Vietnam, the U.S. Army had transitioned to being an all-volunteer force while at the same time combating debilitating disciplinary problems associated with racial tension, drug use, and assaults against the NCO and officer corps. By the 1980’s, these challenges had been largely resolved. Combat forces were reequipped with advanced armored fighting vehicles, including a true IFV, and doctrine was rewritten to account for the new force capabilities.



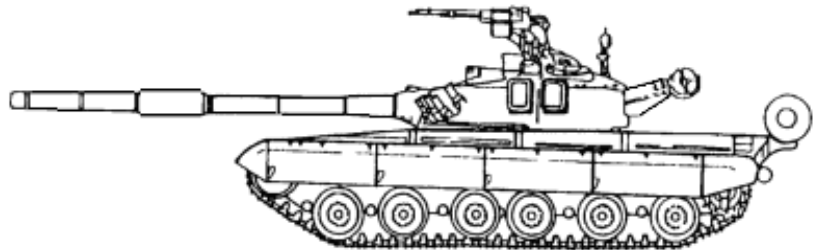
Soviet mechanization of their infantry produced several armored fighting vehicles. Among the most famous was the BMP-1, a true infantry fighting vehicle that mounted a 73-mm low-velocity gun and antitank guided missiles. This is a captured Iraqi vehicle.

(Department of Defense)

In the mid-1980's, the forces of both the Soviet Union and the United States had reached the highest capability they could have potentially wielded during the Cold War. Both forces were thoroughly mechanized and well supported by artillery and air power. The tanks were fast, and both well armed and armored. An offensive by either force would have been the very definition of "armored momentum".

Soviet forces in East Germany were well equipped with the T-80 tank by the mid-1980's. The T-80 was judged a formidable weapon by the U.S. Army.

(U.S. Army)



U.S. forces in the Fulda Gap fielded a new generation of weapons systems during the 1980's. M113 armored personnel carriers were gradually displaced by the M2 and M3 Bradley infantry and cavalry fighting vehicles. The M1 Abrams tank entered service, and the relatively quiet performance of its turbine engine won it the sobriquet "Whispering Death". 155-mm self-propelled artillery was substantially improved, and AH-64 attack helicopters with "fire and forget" capability added a new dimension to anti-armor ambushes.

M2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicles in the field with dismounted troops during REFORGER 85.

(U.S. Army)

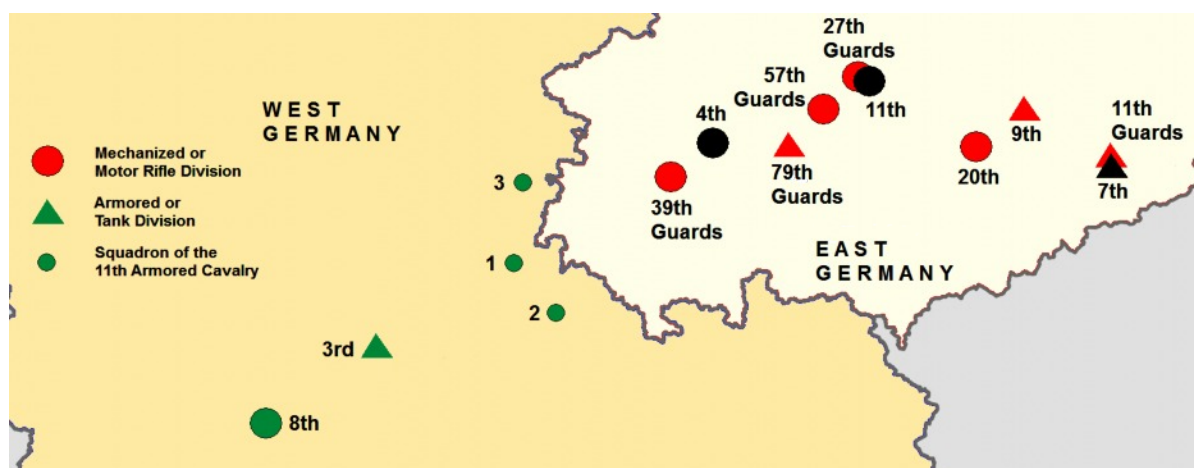


Since 1945, both forces had vastly improved their capacity for sustained mechanized warfare. Until well into the 1960's, the forces of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact had by and large strongly resembled those present at the close of the Second World War. Subsequent technological developments, however, swiftly altered the characteristics of armored warfare. The Yom Kippur War of 1973 vividly displayed the impact of antitank guided missiles on the modern battlefield, with the rate of tank losses surprising U.S. Army planners. Helicopters had added a third dimension to ground force operations.

Less dramatic technological improvements had also made a huge difference. The latest generation of vehicle optics and electronics made combat at night and in obscuring conditions practical. Radio networks were routinely encrypted, and jamming of enemy transmissions as well as triangulation of enemy stations were standard operations for both sides.

By this point in the Cold War, V Corps was certainly at one of its high points of readiness for battle. Units were well equipped and well trained. The region between Frankfurt am Main and the border camps of the 11th Armored Cavalry was practically a single huge training ground for V Corps. Columns of armored vehicles were an everyday sight, and the skies were seldom free of military aircraft.

Neither the Soviet nor the U.S. armed forces realized that change was coming. A confrontation that had endured for decades was about to fundamentally alter in character.



V Corps deployment in 1985. Corps headquarters was located in Frankfurt, as was the headquarters of the 3rd Armored Division. The squadrons of the 11th Armored Cavalry screened the border from Bad Hersfeld in the north to Bad Kissingen in the south, with regimental headquarters located on Downs Barracks in Fulda. Soviet forces are marked in red and East German forces in black.

Put your head between your legs, and kiss your ass goodbye
- GI humor, referring to the posture one should adopt in preparation for an imminent nuclear blast.

As important as such qualities as the relative strength, training, and morale of the opposing conventional forces on either side of the Fulda Gap were, the tactical and operational situation was always overshadowed by what were initially atomic, and later, nuclear weapons. The awkward aerial bombs that ended the Second World War were rapidly developed during the 1950's into smaller weapons suited to delivery and deployment by tactical formations of both sides.

Until August 1949, the U.S. possessed atomic weapons while the Soviets did not. It was a huge trump card that allowed the U.S. to draw down its strength in Europe – until a combination of Soviet espionage and research produced their own atomic bomb. The Korean War broke out the following year and remained a conventional conflict, despite neither North Korea nor China possessing atomic weapons. Against the expert wisdom of the time, the use of atomic weapons in wartime had not proved inevitable.

Nevertheless, the use of such weapons remained a temptation for both sides during the Cold War in Europe, especially as “tactical” nuclear weapons with limited destructive effects were developed. The Soviets developed offensive plans in which such weapons were to blast a path through NATO defenses with the object of rapidly occupying all of West Germany. The U.S. believed the concentration of forces required for a Soviet attack would present opportunities for the destruction of large enemy formations at a single blow. Less decisively, smaller weapons of mass destruction were seen as “super demolitions” to close off valleys with tree blow-downs on a large scale as well as the generation of irradiated rubble that would have been very time-consuming and logistically difficult to remove.

In the case of the Fulda Gap, both sides could have found reasons for the employment of tactical nuclear weapons. With even a small amount of warning, V Corps could have heavily reinforced the cavalry units in the Fulda Gap and mounted a strong defense – perhaps prompting Soviet use of tactical nuclear weapons to quickly achieve a breakthrough. Likewise, the topography and forestation of the Fulda Gap invited the use of such weapons by the U.S. to block armored avenues of advance or strike large concentrations of Soviet troops and equipment. Understandably, the West Germans hoped fervently that in the event of war, neither side would succumb to the temptation to employ such destructive firepower.

Besides nuclear weapons, the other armaments bogeyman was the potential employment of chemical weapons. NATO believed the Soviets would employ chemical agents on a large scale in an attempt to slow down and disrupt NATO's response to an attack. What is clear is the use of such weapons would have slowed down the operations of both sides. The individual protective gear of the Cold War was bulky, hard to move around in, and made communications, especially over radio or telephones, difficult and prone to misunderstanding. Further debilitating to unit effectiveness would have been the need to disinfect personnel, vehicles, and aircraft – not to mention the need to aid those stricken by chemical agents.



U.S. troops wearing the M17 gas mask, during the 1991 Gulf War. The M17 was a standard gas mask of the latter half of the Cold War.

(Department of Defense)

But what seemed possible, perhaps even probable, during the unrelenting tension of the Cold War in Europe, appears horrific in hindsight. It is hard to imagine what the Soviets would have gained by occupying a West Germany littered with irradiated rubble and populated by terrified survivors overwhelmed by millions of dead. Even a single event like that of the 1986 Chernobyl meltdown left lasting effects in regions as distant as Western Europe.

Clearly, had weapons of mass destruction been used by either side during a struggle for the Fulda Gap, such an act would have represented an escalation massive enough to transform the entire war and perhaps even to render the possession of particular terrain features irrelevant. Military thought, at least on the side of the U.S., tended more to expectations of tactical armored combat in the Fulda Gap rather than the mass destruction of troop formations of either side. Of course, wars have never developed in the manner expected – and the peaceful valleys of the Rhön, the Spessart, and the Knüllgebirge could have ended up smoldering pits of incredible destruction so poisoned with radioactivity as to be beyond any foreseeable further use by humans.

Were the sentiments of this common proverb always valid, NATO and the Warsaw Pact should have enjoyed an exemplary relationship as neighboring power blocs. As it was, the vastly different economic systems and development in the two halves of Europe resulted in widespread prosperity for Western Europe but only a partial rebuilding followed by stagnation for Eastern Europe.

Predictably, those in Eastern Europe who could vote with their feet, did so. The resulting drain in human capital, particularly those who were well-educated, alarmed the communist regimes, which responded by the construction of elaborate border fences – the Iron Curtain.

Between the two Germanys, a common frontier of 1,381 kilometers was gradually fenced off by East German construction activities that began in May 1952 with the use of barriers and barbed wire. The “Curtain” was substantially improved when the Berlin Wall was constructed in 1961, and ultimately became a barrier zone half a kilometer in depth with multiple fences, minefields, guard dogs, patrols, and observation towers. This barrier would not have proved a serious obstacle for military forces bent on invasion, but it proved an exceedingly difficult obstacle for those who wished to escape from East Germany.

In a state of constant readiness, the 14th and 11th Armored Cavalry Regiments of V Corps were among the most battle-ready formations of U.S. Army Europe. The armored cavalry troops and their supporting tank and artillery units were always in one of three states – they were on border surveillance duty, or on gunnery exercises at training ranges, or recovering unit readiness at their home barracks and ready to deploy on demand as required by alerts.

Regimental headquarters continuously ran a border operations center that remained in communication with observation and listening posts manned by cavalry scouts along the inner German border, and passed along reports of Soviet and East German activity to V Corps Headquarters in Frankfurt. Each squadron operated a forward observation post at which a troop of armored cavalry was deployed on a rotational basis. Soviet forces were only occasionally observed in proximity to the border; by and large, the East German border police, a motorized force equipped as light infantry, patrolled the border and manned the observation towers.



Soldier of the 11th Armored Cavalry on border operations. An East German observation tower is visible in the background.

(U.S. Army)

The inner German border was an especially sensitive military frontier. Both sides made occasional shows of force, and, on rare occasion, the frontier was breached either by accident or, on the part of Soviet forces, by design. The potential for miscalculation was very high, and the consequences of failure called for the employment of only the most professional military formations. The 11th and 14th Armored Cavalry Regiments proved themselves more than equal to the requirements of the situation.

The incredible and unexpected occurred on November 9, 1989 – in an atmosphere of political turmoil, East German authorities opened the Berlin Wall. The opening of other border crossings, including those in the Fulda Gap, soon followed. It was a stunning political event. On the border, the men of the 11th Armored Cavalry watched East Germans stream across the once formidable frontier. The Cold War between the Soviet Union and NATO had effectively ended.

They also serve who only stand and wait
- Milton, Sonnet XVII, *On His Blindness*

The sudden collapse of communism in Eastern Europe led to an only slightly less rapid withdrawal of the Soviet Army back into the USSR, itself an entity that was not long for history after the events of 1989. With the Soviet withdrawal and the collapse of the East German state, the long-expected role of the Fulda Gap to be the “first battle of the next war” evaporated overnight. It was another year before the affairs of East Germany as a state were legally resolved, but in a stroke, the reason for having V Corps stationed in what became central Germany disappeared. Once the region ceased to be a military frontier, the Fulda Gap, long a powerful symbol of the Cold War, became an unremarkable group of valleys near the geographic center of Germany.

Memorial to the 14th Armored Cavalry Regiment on the site of the former Downs Barracks in Fulda. This site retains many reminders of the U.S. Army's Cold War service in Fulda.

(W. B. Wilson)



The war expected to start there never occurred, a victory for those who championed resolute behavior by democratic states as a way of warding off war. The U.S. Army, though, devoted little reflection to the contribution it made to the peace in Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. Within a year of the communist collapse, Iraq invaded Kuwait and triggered a complex series of events and conflicts that are still ongoing.

Although one can understand how subsequent events have consumed the Army's attention, there is something improper about the relative lack of official acknowledgement of the sacrifices of generations of Americans who served over the 44 years of the Cold War.

"Cold" this period of ideological conflict may have dominantly been, but it was not bloodless. There were instances of deliberate killing by the Soviets such as the 1964 shoot-down of a lost jet trainer and its crew of three as well as such outrages as the murder of Major Arthur Nicholson in 1985.

But even beyond deliberate action by the enemy, there were many accidental deaths of soldiers killed during realistic training in every kind of weather and at all hours of the day. Trucks plunged off icy bridges, explosives prematurely detonated, and aircraft fell out of the sky. The casualties were real if not nearly so intense as those suffered by units in combat, and these losses were incurred as a result of national policy.

A review by the author of DoD death totals for the period 1946 through 1989 produced an estimate of roughly 100,000 deaths apart from those caused by enemy action during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. The deaths associated with these losses include all causes to include training accidents.

In U.S. Army Europe alone, the losses must have numbered into the thousands considering the length of time and size of the force involved. For the families who lost soldiers, questions of war and peace mattered not – dead was dead – and the crushing suffocation of grief was, as ever, intense.

However one reckons the losses, the primary beneficiary of this sacrifice has been Germany. After 45 years of partition, the Germans peacefully reunited and now enjoy a dominant political and economic position in the European Union.



Thankfully relegated to the past, the border fence that once divided the two Germanys is now a museum artifact. The fence's steel mesh was so designed as to painfully pinch the fingers of those attempting to climb it.

(W. B. Wilson)

If the service of American soldiers in the Fulda Gap has not exactly been celebrated by either the German or American federal governments, it has also not been altogether forgotten in the twenty years since U.S. forces there stood down and returned to the United States. Marker stones at the barracks in Bad Hersfeld, Fulda, and Bad Kissingen have been erected to the memory of the 14th and 11th Armored Cavalry Regiments.

The former Downs Barracks in Fulda has become an industrial park with one foot planted firmly in the past. Modern buildings are situated on a road named *Black-Horse-Strasse* and an adjacent athletic association fielded a baseball team called the “Fulda Blackhorses”.

The most substantial tribute to the defense of the Fulda Gap is found near the village of Rasdorf, once expected to be on the main route of Soviet invasion into central West Germany. There, Observation Point Alpha, a border surveillance camp once operated by the cavalry, has been converted into a museum. The museum depicts the lives of the soldiers who manned OP Alpha and allows visitors to understand the role of the camp in the greater context of the Cold War. This fine museum and memorial has been established by the *Point Alpha Stiftung*, and is sustained by the German states of Hesse and Thuringia, the administrative district of Fulda, the district of Warburg, the Development Association of the Point Alpha Memorial, the city of Geisa and the municipality of Rasdorf.

Memorial to the Cold War service of the U.S. Cavalry at the Point Alpha Museum.

(W. B. Wilson)



The former camp also offers a relaxing view of the verdant fields and forested hills leading into Thuringia – free of fencing, watch towers, troops, mines, and dogs whose sole purpose was to control the movement of peoples. For those who served in the Fulda Gap, perhaps the most satisfying reward is to be found in that view.



**The view into Thuringia
from the site of the
former Observation Point
Alpha.**

(W. B. Wilson)

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it
– George Santayana

Twenty years after the last U.S. troops left the Fulda Gap, Russia annexed Crimea, seizing what legally had been Ukrainian territory since the 1950's. Further animating this disturbing sense of *déjà vu* is the spectacle of a Russia led by a former KGB officer and reprising the role of the Weimar Republic, to include feelings of betrayal fueled by a toxic nationalism. It is a remarkably dangerous situation.

Incredibly, over twenty years after the Cold War ended, it appears to be reemerging. That, however, is a misleading perception. In truth, it was the West that supposed the Cold War had come to an end. For many in the Russian leadership, the calm of the last twenty years was only a pause to gather strength and reorganize.

Russia's return to being an aggressive power has strongly alarmed the Baltic Republics and Poland. As of 2015, these four nations have formally requested a permanent NATO presence of five mechanized brigades as a shield against further Russian aggression. Clearly, a force of five brigades would not be capable of stopping a full-scale Russian invasion. The role of these brigades, then, would be that of a trip-wire force.

Securing international frontiers in the midst of an ideological conflict is a mission that NATO, and the U.S. Army, is acquainted with very well. It may be time for NATO's planners to dust off the lessons learned from the service of the 14th and 11th Armored Cavalry Regiments in the Fulda Gap. There is certainly much in that experience to inform the planners of the present. One wonders if there is not a role for a regiment or two of U.S. heavy armored cavalry in the trip-wire force requested by the northeastern tier of NATO countries.

Troopers of the 2nd Cavalry Regiment return to Rose Barracks in March 2015 after a 1,800 kilometer road march through Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and the Czech Republic. The road march, titled "Dragoon Ride", was intended to demonstrate U.S. solidarity with NATO's northeastern tier of nations.

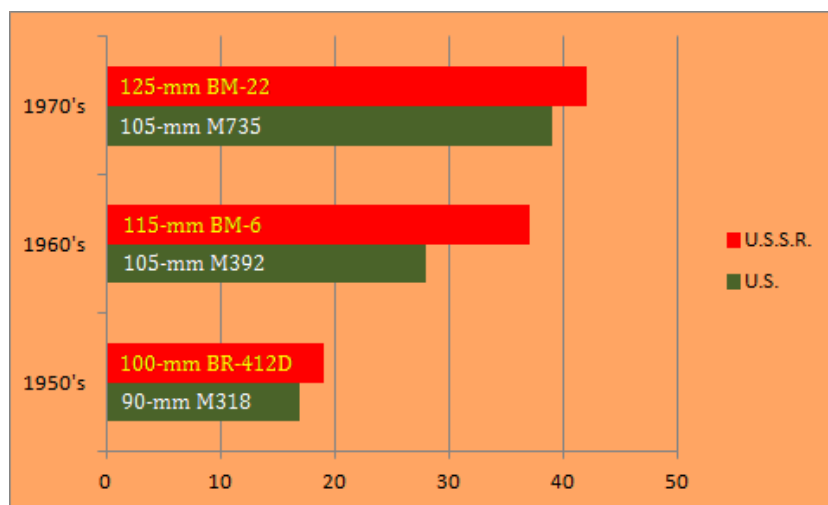
(Department of Defense)



APPENDIX – Armored Combat in the Fulda Gap

The “first battle of the next war” was expected to be a massive clash of armor in the area of Rasdorf and Eiterfeld. Technically-minded readers may wish to know more about the tanks’ protection (armor) and the projectiles they fired to destroy other tanks.

At the end of the Second World War, tank cannon mainly fired two types of armor piercing projectiles. The first was full-caliber armor piercing (AP), usually capped (APC), and with a ballistic cap (APCBC). The limitations of practical size and weight for full-caliber armor piercing projectiles had been reached by 1945, and so a second type of projectile, called armor piercing discarding sabot (APDS), became the primary type employed in the Cold War. These projectiles employed sub-caliber penetrators that weighed less and could be fired at very high muzzle velocities. By the late 1960’s, the sub-caliber penetrators were of narrower diameter and fin-stabilized. These were known as armor piercing fin stabilized discarding sabot (APFSDS).



Selected kinetic projectiles of the Cold War. Estimated penetration in centimeters of rolled homogeneous armor at point-blank range.

(W. B. Wilson)

During the 1950’s, a third type of armor piercing round came into widespread use, called high explosive anti tank (HEAT). HEAT projectiles used shaped-charge warheads to defeat armor. Although typically capable of penetrating more armor than kinetic projectiles of the era, HEAT rounds suffered from much shorter effective range. HEAT, though, had the advantage of keeping the same armor piercing performance at any range while kinetic rounds lost their armor penetrating capability over range as the projectile slowed down. HEAT rounds were also widely fielded with infantry units as the primary ammunition of antitank rocket launchers and recoilless rifles.

To defend against projectiles, tanks were protected by massive slabs of rolled homogenous armor, the thickest parts of which shielded the front of the vehicle. By the end of the Cold War, the increasing effectiveness of HEAT rounds led to the development of advanced types of composite armor, such as the British-developed Chobham armor employed on M1 tanks. The Cold War saw a constant technical competition between tank armor and armor piercing projectiles, of which the development of Chobham armor was only one aspect. Training in the U.S. Army in the 1980's emphasized "what can be seen can be hit and what can be hit can be killed". With the development of sophisticated rangefinders, gun stabilization equipment, thermal sights, and various sensors, the effective range at which other tanks could be hit and destroyed increased several times from that typical in 1945.

	U.S.	U.S.S.R.
1950's	18cm (M48A1)	20cm (T-55)
1960's	18cm (M60)	23cm (T-62)
1970's	25cm (M60A3)	36cm (early T-72)

Maximum frontal armor of selected tanks of the Cold War

Although the armor piercing capability given in the chart above declined the farther the projectile traveled from the cannon's muzzle, there is still a striking discrepancy in the penetration of the projectiles when compared to the amount of armor that a tank could carry and remain a mobile fighting machine. It was this discrepancy from which the Army's guidance that ". . . what can be hit can be killed" was derived. To be hit was to be killed – a simple if lethal truism.

Beyond tank versus tank combat, the Fulda Gap battlefield would have bristled with guided missiles and antitank rocket launchers. No matter who would have won the battle, it is clear that the battlefield would have been littered with the destroyed hulks of thousands of armored fighting vehicles. Such carnage is difficult to imagine, but the 1973 battle in the Valley of Tears gives some idea on a smaller scale of how a battle for the Fulda Gap may have developed.

M60 Patton on gunnery exercise, ca. 1965.

(U.S. Army)



Further Reading

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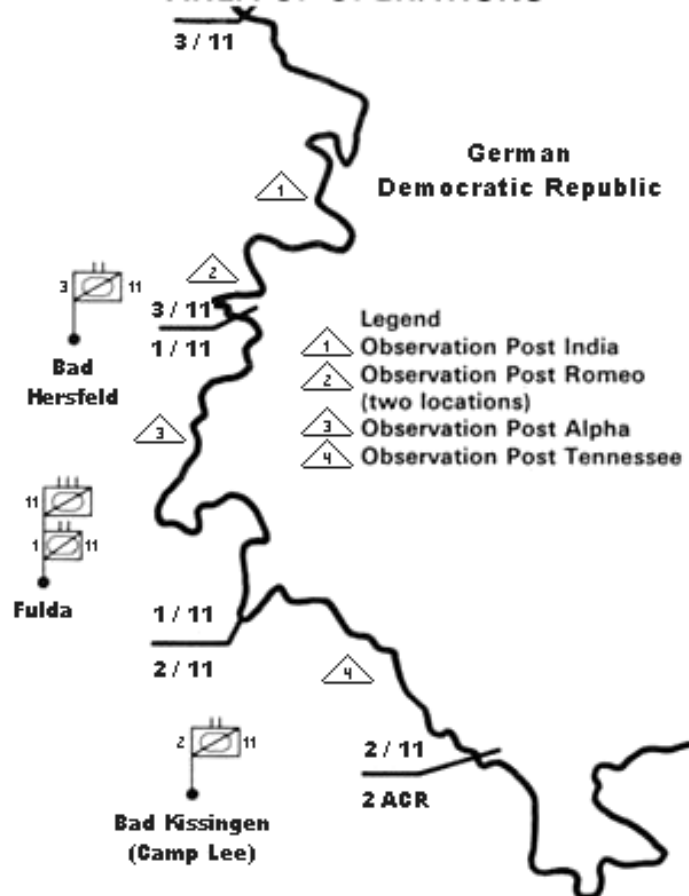
Website "American Cold War Veterans".

Website "Point Alpha Foundation".

About the author

W. B. Wilson is a military history enthusiast whose interest is the organization of the military forces of the Second World War. He served in the U.S. Army in Germany during the Cold War and currently resides in Europe.

11TH ARMORED CAVALRY REGIMENT AREA OF OPERATIONS



(U.S. Army)